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AP Language and Composition

Obama and the Mainstream Media: Has it Gone Too Far This Time?

Introduction and Context

No one can deny the influence of the news people receive on the way they think, beginning with the earliest newspapers at the advent of the printing press, all the way to today, where we are virtually surrounded by news and media. The mainstream media, which is generally considered to be comprised of the major cable news networks and the AP (associated press), of course has an impact on the lives of people in the modern era. The real question is how much impact can the “mainstream media” have on how events which they cover unfold? In the 2008 presidential election, the media played a larger role than in any other previous election. Reporters were there for every second of the “historic” event, asking questions and, in too many cases, giving opinions as well. This is the chief cause of the inherent danger with the media: bias. Its job is to provide information, unfiltered by partiality and unaffected by opinions. Unfortunately, more and more reporters have allowed their personal beliefs to slip into the news, and now “news” stations have ceased to report the news and instead begun to shape it.

The most common accusation leveled against the mainstream media is liberal bias. For years, conservatives have claimed that liberal bias has turned the public against them, while painting the liberals and Democrats in a more favorable light. The most commonly cited culprit today is MSNBC News, but other networks, newspapers, and even the associated press have been accused of leaning to the left.

This is not a new issue; in fact the debate about the honesty, accuracy, and leanings of the mainstream media has been raging for a long time. For instance, during the presidential primaries in 2008, ABC hosted a debate between Barack Obama and then-contender Hilary Clinton. During the debate George Stephanopoulos, who was the moderator, had the gall to ask Obama about his association with Reverend Wright and his association with the 1960’s radical William Ayers. Obama deftly avoided giving incriminating answers to the

questions, but the next day ABC found itself under a mountain of angry mail and email from Obama supporters outraged by the “unfair” coverage. They claimed that Obama had received more difficult questions than Hilary, and even some news reporters joined in the thrashing of ABC’s debate. Greg Mitchell wrote in *Editor and Publisher* that it was “perhaps the most embarrassing performance by the media in a major presidential debate in years.” (Obama’s secret weapon: The media)

If the media can influence people’s opinions, can they affect the outcome of a discussion, a career, or even a whole election? Bernard Goldberg, author of *“Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News”*, set out to find the answer in his most recent book titled *“A Slobbering Love Affair: The True (And Pathetic) Story of the Torrid Romance Between Barack Obama and the Mainstream Media.”*

The Author’s Background

Bernard Goldberg has been a force in news coverage and commentary for decades, working at CBS News starting in 1972 after being a member of the associated press. In 2001 he wrote his first book, *“Bias”*, in which he attacked his (soon to be) former employer and leveled accusations of liberal slant at a number of people within the CBS organization. The book became a number one New York Times bestseller, and since then he has written several other books and often appears on television and radio shows to discuss issues of the day. In 2007 he published *“Crazies to the Left of Me, Wimps to the Right: How One Side Lost Its Mind and the Other Lost Its Nerve”*, which harshly criticized both of America’s political parties and also became a New York Times number one bestseller. *“A Slobbering Love Affair”* returns again to the subject of media bias, clearly cementing Goldberg’s authority and intelligence in the areas of media and analysis.

The Book’s Argument

The book was written as an analysis of the media’s campaign coverage for the 2008 presidential election. Goldberg believes that the mainstream media not only totally slanted its coverage in favor of Barack Obama, but lost its credibility in the process.

MSNBC is perhaps the network most responsible for the obviously biased coverage. Commentators like Keith Olbermann and Chris Matthews both went almost to the point of campaigning for Obama, praising

him on every show and even admitting it was difficult to stay unbiased. But even the regular “news” on MSNBC was favorable for Obama. The book cites the day Sarah Palin was added chosen as McCain’s running mate as a prime example of this. Before she had been picked, there had been a “scandal” (well-covered by MSNCB) over a question a reported asked McCain: How many houses do you own? McCain didn’t remember, and the media ran with it as evidence of elitism. When MSNBC heard of Palin’s announcement as the Republican vice-presidential candidate, the first “breaking news” headline that appeared on their station read “How many houses does Palin add to the Republican ticket?” This raised an outcry from conservatives, who pointed to the incident as an obvious example of the liberal bias that permeates the media.

MSNBC is not the only organization that Goldberg accuses of unfair coverage. He also charges the associated press, which has been the standard of unbiased reporting as long as there have been newspapers, with allowing personal opinions to slip into its columns. As a former member of the AP, Goldberg’s writing indicates his disgust for its newfound commentary. According to Goldberg, this is one of the most important parts of the media that is rapidly losing credibility. If the newspapers and the people who read them can’t trust the golden standard of media standards, who can they trust?

There are a number of stories that the book uses as evidence of media bias, including some that the media didn’t cover at all and others that were blown out of proportion. The most obvious example is the media’s blatant refusal to cover the Rev. Wright and Bill Ayers controversy. The mainstream media pushed both of Obama’s most controversial connections out of the way as fast as they could, and then branded attempts to investigate further as unfair or even racist. The Obama campaign’s response to the Ayers story, in particular, was accepted by the majority of the media almost without question. The “I was only eight years old” line became one of Obama’s favorites; throughout the race he used it again and again to dodge the Ayers connection while the media turned a blind eye. Rev. Wright, on the other hand was at least covered. However, the media similarly covered it as quickly as possible, and then attacked any further attempts to investigate the “dead” issue. This pattern was often seen over the course of the race.

Perhaps the most disgraceful story of the election was Joe the Plumber's. Joe, who thanks to the media we know has the real first name Samuel, became the target of reports everywhere when he asked the question that was heard around the campaign: Would Obama raise his taxes? In answer dangerously close to socialism, Obama replied "I think when you spread the wealth around, it's good for everybody." While some in the media began to investigate Obama's possible penchant for socialism, others instead began to "investigate" Joe. From this use of the media's time and resources, we learned that Joe was not a licensed plumber, that he owed back taxes, and that his name was not even Joe! The media managed to turn the tables on a valid question – Obama's political views – and instead investigated a private citizen who had simply asked a valid question.

Overall, Goldberg concedes that the media did not lose the campaign for John McCain. However, the media's attempts to protect Obama from potentially harmful stories will cost it dearly in the end when people stop blindly trusting in the accuracy of its reporting and turn to new sources for their news.

Opposing Points of View

Even though many people admit, at least in part, that the media leans to the left, there are some people who believe that it is unbiased or even biased in favor of conservatives.

"A Rasmussen poll (Rasmussen Reports, [7/19/08](#)) found that 49 percent of respondents believe that reporters will try to help Obama win, while 14 percent believe most will try to help McCain. Strikingly, "45 percent say that most reporters would hide information if it hurt the candidate they wanted to win," while only 30 percent disagree. Such polls reveal the power of the right-wing media in America."

(The Myth of Pro-Obama Media Bias)

The author of *"The Myth of Pro-Obama Media Bias"* says that the discrepancy between the number of positive and negative stories about Obama is due to the amount of coverage he received. Also, Obama received more magazine covers, and thus favorable stories from those outlets, because "his face sells a lot more magazines than McCain's picture. That's a pro-profit bias, not a liberal bias." (The Myth of Pro-Obama Media Bias)

The methods used to measure media bias also may not be entirely accurate. Many studies use researcher's interpretations of what constitutes a "positive" or "negative" story. They also assume that a 50-50 (positive-negative) rating means fair coverage. The majority of stories concerning the campaign were about strategy, fundraising, and in general the "game" of the campaign. Since Obama was perceived as winning, he got more positive coverage in this respect. (The Myth of Pro-Obama Media Bias) (Project for Excellence in Journalism)

Conclusion

In my opinion, *"A Slobbering Love Affair: The True (And Pathetic) Story of the Torrid Romance Between Barack Obama and the Mainstream Media"* is a book that exposes some of the shoddiest reporting in the United States in a long time. Goldberg backs up his thesis with good facts, interesting studies, and a general understanding of how the media system works. The witty, intelligent commentary also helps to get his point across. After reading this book, the media bias that Goldberg discusses is even clearer and more obvious than before. Stories such as those of Rev. Wright and Bill Ayers were completely passed over by the vast majority of the media and reporters in America. The blatant disregard of the mainstream media for anything approaching standards in this past election was shocking, and I think this book does a good job of bringing to light attempts by media outlets such as MSNBC to transform from passive viewers of events and start having a direct influence on their outcome.

Of course, the support of the media does not win a campaign. It can, however, help soften up some of the damaging events or revelations that inevitably take place throughout a run for office. After reading *"A Slobbering Love Affair"* I agree with Goldberg analysis of the situation: the media is only hurting itself by continuing to allow the personal opinions of journalists and reporters to slant the news. Especially with the absolutely ridiculous visited upon figures like Joe the Plumber, a regular person who had the courage to ask Obama a real question, the mainstream media has clearly lost its authority as a reliable source of valid and important information. While the media's motto used to be "speak truth to power," it seems that these days it instead strives to speak the truth that power agrees with.

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Name		Date	
Topic/Title			
Area	Score	Comments	
Ideas and Content			
Organization			
Word Choice			
Sentence Fluency			
Voice			
Lower Order Concerns			
Presentation (Research Guide)			
Insight			
Support			
Introduction and Conclusion			
TOTAL	0		
GRADE out of 50	0		